

Derek Walcott:

a personal encounter

by W. Rutgers

Mid August the well-known poet and playwright Derek Walcott spent a long weekend on Aruba to hold a few lectures and a workshop for stageactors, authors and stage managers.

The author, who was born in St. Lucia in 1930, is also in the picture at present for another reason. Frank Martinus Arion has translated his bestknown play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967), which was once again performed during the Carifesta in Barbados last July. The renowned theatrical group Tie-Drie, which is intensely promoting productions of the Third World, is making preparations to present it under direction of the Curaçolene Edsel Samson.

Because of his critical attitude towards the recently held Carifesta Walcott also attracted the necessary attention. Three reasons to try to get better acquainted with the man and his work.

Independent

Derek Walcott has sometimes been characterized as "The literary Humanist in the Caribbean", because in him we find combined a very profound reading of both European and non-European cultural history, a great mastery of language and a mild vision on life and on his fellow man.

He refuses consistently to take up position as a partisan and is a man of compromises. Thus he takes a stand against the dominant colonial British influence of his youth, but does not rush into the opposite. He values and uses both European and African elements, because they both belong to the cultural history of the Caribbean area.

In surroundings that were mostly Catholic and where Patois or French was spoken, his family was Methodist and he applied himself to the English language, which he cherished and explored in all its diversity, and refused to identify himself onesidedly with Caribbean variants of that language. Yet he uses all four of the languages, if he considers this functional and magnificent examples are to be found in his poems. His vision on life does not prevent him from judging, but he will not condemn before having profoundly and deliberately considered the matter. This independent attitude is not always appreciated, but how typical this is of him becomes evident when I confront him with R. Cudjoe's rather bold statement concerning his work: "This anti-democratic and nihilistic Naipaulian tendency has been embraced by other Caribbean writers such as John Hearne, Orlando Patterson, and Derek Walcott". His reaction is guarded: those are rather divergent persons mentioned there and what does Cudjoe mean by "anti-democratic"? The fact that you criticize your society is difficult to accept for the people here. He points out the lethargy and corruption, but does not want to be as negative as V.S. Naipaul, who does not see any possibility of improvement and he absolutely refuses "to dismiss his people". For the outsider it is often hard to understand that you may utter sharp criticism on certain aspects of the society in which you live and at the same time be furiously in love with your people.

Lack of tradition and cadre

As soon as he publishes something

Derek Walcott, born in St. Lucia on January 23rd. 1930. Lost his father when he was only one year old. His mother was head of a Methodist school and did everything possible to give Derek and his twin brother a good education. Derek studied at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica; after that he received a fellowship from The Rockefeller Foundation to study theatre sciences in the United States.

Since 1961 he is director of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. Presently he is living in Trinidad and holds a staff position as lecturer of poetry at Harvard University in Boston.

At a very early age Derek Walcott started to write and publish for his own account: 25 Poems (1949); Epitaph for the Young (1949); Poems (1952).

In a Green Night (1962) was published in England just like The Castaway (1965) and The Gulf (1969). Besides that *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and other plays (1970) were published in the U.S.A., as well as the long autobiographical poem *Another Life* (1972). Finally I want to mention the more recent poem *The Starapple Kingdom*. And this winter *The Fortunate Traveller* will see the light.

Both poetry and theatre continue to hold Walcott's complete attention.

the European author is immediately placed in a broader context; not so the Caribbean author, who remains a lot more isolated. The work of someone like Wilson Harris must therefore be viewed in this light. He makes an attempt at creating tradition by using different historical periods simultaneously and placing time in a mythical framework, as he did in his *Palace of the Peacock*. In this way Walcott finds a relationship among various Caribbean writers without there being a question of mutual influencing. Critics often stress the British influence that supposedly would have had its effect on Walcott. He does acknowledge this, for as a young author in the colonies he felt sharply that he was heir to a foreign tradition. The forefathers, European and African, are absorbed, but the question is what to do with this tradition, how not to let it become a burden, ►

but on the contrary to allow it to function in a fertile way for your own development.

The lacking cadre is mentioned when we touch upon the Carifesta on Barbados, where Walcott was very much absent. He explains why he stated that it was a waste of time and effort to perpetrate the myth that there is a West Indian culture. There are certainly common historical characteristics, but those are integrated functionally in today's visible structures and organisations. So those who attend the Carifesta are in fact celebrating the absence of every condition for a genuine culture and that is the one that fulfills a role in daily life: culture is practised! He predicts the disappointment of the artist who back again on his own island and in his isolation, detached from any tradition or culture, has to go back to work again, but who in reality is not able to do so, because the necessary facilities are lacking. Maybe Cuba is an exception to this rule? Why isn't there a Caribbean

translation-centre to get to know and appreciate each other's work? Why isn't there a follow-up to such a conference. Why aren't more scholarships made available to talent wishing to fully develop in an artistic sense? These kinds of lacunae fill Walcott with pessimism with regard to his people.

Challenge

But just a few minutes later we are talking about the statement he once made: "one race's quarrel with another God" and he explains his objections to the way in which he was always taught to see God as white.

The metropolitan has consciously suppressed the distinctive Caribbean cultural developments and has never made any effort to really understand and appreciate the cultural expressions in the colonies.

In this way Walcott again and again demonstrates that he is a critic who is moderate, because he shows understanding for both

sides. Superficially it might seem that he is indeed nihilistic, as he cries down both sides. But the actual function of his criticism is positive. What do you do with this knowledge of the deficiencies you are mentioning?

In the lectures and workshop he held in Aruba Walcott stressed a number of aspects that he wants to turn into a positive direction, to not consider the historical heritage, the cultural and language diversity, the racial segmentation as an obstacle, but on the contrary to appreciate them in a positive way. In the Caribbean nearly all the great world cultures encounter each other. We have the opportunity to expand our experiences through contacts with all these diversities in culture, language and history. The challenge for today's Caribbean man is to give to this a new unity and structure of its own and thus, in the international context, participate in the total culture, proceeding from his own specific situation. ■